Syria: Should the United States Do More?

[background music]

**Kurt Volker:** The McCain Institute is all about action. We're a do tank. In the best American tradition of open inquiry, spirited discussion, and practical action, we have reintroduced the practice of holding structured, timed debates about the critical choices our country faces.

We bring together seasoned experts and professional moderators. We bring out different points of view to help inform you, the public, about the choices our country needs to make.

The McCain Institute's Debate and Decision Series offers a frank, informed, and distinctly nonpartisan examination of critical challenges in our world today. Our timely debates have tackled issues facing countries like Syria.

**Aaron David Miller:** The tragedy of Syria, it seems to me, is this. So much blood has flowed that it is impossible to imagine a negotiated transition now.

**Robert Kagan:** Are we going to get a perfect outcome in Syria? Absolutely not. It'll be far from perfect. The question that Leon and I keep asking you is "What is the outcome that we're going to get when we do nothing?"

**Kurt:** Afghanistan.

**Steven Clemons:** There was a point at which this, the mission of this, like so many missions abroad, became state building, became human rights, many of them laudable goals, but in my view, using the Pentagon to achieve those objectives was where things went wrong.

**Frederick Kagan:** We may be weary of this war, but this war is not weary of us. The war doesn't end just because we decide we don't feel like playing anymore.

**Kurt:** Iran.

**Robert Wexler:** If all of these things do not work, and that's the big if, if they all do not work, then President Obama is in a far different set of circumstances than unfortunately we were in when President Bush went to war in Iraq.

**Danielle Pletka:** It's going to be a dangerous operation for whoever undertakes it. It's not going to be an end to the Iranian nuclear program. I don't think we're fooled about that at all.

**Kurt:** And Russia.

**David Kramer:** The West cannot simply sit by and engage in a business-as-usual kind of
approach. We have to give meaning to the word "unacceptable." If we say Russian actions are unacceptable, what are we going to do so as not to accept it?

Thomas Graham: I think we would all like to see Russia be a full-blooded democratic society that professed Western values. It isn't. It isn't going to get there for a long time. The question is "What can outsiders do, that is positive and constructive in that process?"

Kurt: The Debate and Decision Series offers the audience top-rate moderators who guide the debaters and discussion by asking probing questions and steering the debate into lively discourse.

Elise Labott: Is his Russia on the wrong side of history, a weak power that will eventually succumb to the greater forces of the 21st century, or is Putin making history?

Juan Williams: It's legitimate to use it to kill people for an imminent threat to the United States. It's just that you want it more clearly defined.

Jessica Yellin: What would you prescribe as the best means of getting the outcome you want?

Kurt: The McCain Institute's Debate and Decision Series builds a deeper understanding in Washington, mutual respect, political civility, and decisive action. With our seasoned expert panels, we have tackled issues and serious US foreign policy positions such as the Iran nuclear deal.

Bret Stephens: A regime that is capable of taking a stone in one hand and stoning a woman to death, who has been already buried up to her waist, should not be allowed to get anywhere near having the ability to take a nuclear weapon in its other hand and do likewise with its neighbors.

Reuel Gerecht: Look at the way the Iranian regime handles internal politics. Look how they deal with each other. Look how they deal with foreigners, and then let them have some of their own medicine.

Karim Sadjadpour: Because I think once you do have a more representative government in Iran, which follows Iran's national interests, this antipathy toward America, the antipathy toward Israel, this nonsensical nuclear program don't make a lot of sense.

Robert Einhorn: It would be a terrible, terrible thing for Iran to get nuclear weapons. We should go to great lengths to stop them, including use of military force.

Kurt: Drone usage in warfare.

Daphne Eviatar: Drones create the risk that you will expand this war to anywhere you feel like getting some guy that you think is a bad guy or that you've been telling people is a bad guy, but you're not willing to risk your own troops. You're not willing to engage in an armed conflict there.

Spider Marks: We've made a determination that this individual, based on what he or she
has done, is on a list. That person needs to go away. What is available for us to go accomplish that task? That's where I am, right now, in the debate. Boom.

**Cameron Munter:** Drones are a weapon that can be, if used properly, a very humane weapon, a very precise weapon, a weapon that can do things that other weapons cannot.

**Gregory McNeal:** What would we think if the Russians did it? If the Russians are indiscriminately bombing civilians, it's very different than where we are purposely not trying to harm civilians and we're purposely going after a legitimate enemy.

**Kurt:** With a genuine dialogue among decision-makers and experts from different political stances, we hope to bridge the ideas and theories with a policy outcome that will resolve the big questions of the day that are stuck in a status quo.

**Cindy McCain:** This is a very timely discussion tonight. This is a very timely debate. More importantly, we are looking forward to interaction from everyone, in a thoughtful and kind manner.

**John McCain:** The debate and discussion that you are about to observe is exactly what's going to happen on the floor of the United States Senate and in the House of Representatives. This is an issue that needs to be decided by the President and the Congress, and it's a serious one. That is it's got a lot to do with how the United States uses its power and under what circumstances.

**Kurt:** Our debates are free and open to the public. You can watch them live. You can watch them on our website, mccaininstitute.org. You can sign up to receive our Decision Notes event recap. You can see all of our debates on our YouTube channel.

Our goal was to create a safe, open environment for spirited debate over the choices our country needs to make. We hope you can join us for our next debate, here in Washington, DC.

Thank you, everyone, for coming. Good evening. My name's Kurt Volker. I'm the Executive Director of the McCain Institute. I've had the honor of introducing many of the debates here, as you've just seen in this way-too-long video.

[laughter]

**Kurt:** We are very proud to be with you again tonight to present a follow-up debate. McCain Institute was founded to promote character-driven leadership, to advance causes in humanitarian work, human rights, national security. We've done a lot of work in the area of human trafficking.

One of the areas we wanted to focus on was restoring this culture of debate over the choices our country has to make, as you've just seen. Two years ago, we launched this Debate and Decision Series with a debate about Syria. Should the United States save Syria? Should we intervene militarily to try to do that?

Two years ago, we had two of the same panelists that we have here tonight. We had two
others arguing those cases. Tonight, we're going to revisit some of those same questions again and look ahead. What can we do now? Should we do more than we are currently doing?

Before we turn to the debate, I'd like to just show a few of the key arguments that were made at that time so that we refresh our thinking of where we were, and then we're going to be looking forward for the rest of the evening. To our other video.

[video starts]

[music]

**John:** I think it's very fitting that the first discussion in this institute be concerning the issue of Syria. There are very differing views on what action the United States of America and our allies should take.

**Elise:** The Syrian people have called for more US help. The region is looking for more American leadership. In the United States, there is a robust debate on whether the US can and should save Syria.

**Joshua Landis:** The question here tonight is "Can America save Syria?" Only the Syrians can save Syria. America cannot nation-build in the Middle East and should not get in the middle of a sectarian and ethnic war. We've tried to do that twice in the Middle East, and it's ended in tears.

**Robert:** Let me stipulate first of all. Leon and I both stipulate that the United States cannot do everything, everywhere. We cannot involve ourselves, unfortunately, even when there are humanitarian crises. The question really is "Does Syria rise to the level that does require our attention?" Our assertion is that it is.

**Aaron:** It's not a question of saving Syria. It's not a question of should we or could we. The truth is even if we could, we shouldn't because the expenditure of resources that we would need to put into this enterprise would far exceed, in my judgment, our capacity to actually succeed. We don't want own another Arab country.

**Leon Wieseltier:** Nobody is suggesting that the United States go create a new Syria or create a new Iran, but there are people, in all these countries, who deserve our help and who, in the long-term, secularly, as the economists like to say, it would be in our strategic interest to help.

**Robert:** I predict, by the way, in my omniscience, that we will pursue exactly the policy that you both recommend and we will wind up being dragged into Syria in the worst possible circumstances.

**Joshua:** I think that America needs to do a lot more, but I don't think that we can solve or save Syria.

[applause]
Kurt: There we are, dragged into Syria in the worst possible circumstances.

[laughter]

Kurt: I want to just make a few housekeeping announcements first. Feel free to tweet, to use your cell phones for that, but put them on vibrate. Let's not have them ringing, but do have them on vibrate. Do use social media. Do comment on this. The hashtag for this debate is #MIDebateSyria. We'll be starting on a dialogue with that in parallel with the discussion here.

I want to thank many of the people I see in the room, former debaters of ours. I see a couple of ambassadors. I see some of the Syrian-American community, some professors, and some former colleagues of the state department. It's great to have all of you here.

We are honored tonight to have for the third time, one of the best moderators we've seen do this sort of thing, Elise Labott, who is now the global affairs correspondent at CNN. She will introduce the debaters. We hope to have a very lively discussion. Thank you.

[applause]

Elise: Thank you, Kurt and thank you everybody again for coming to debate this vexing problem of Syria. As we saw two years ago, we met to talk about the Syrian Civil War. It was then about two years old. At that time there were about 60,000 Syrians dead, hundreds and thousands of refugees fleeing to neighboring Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq and two million people displaced inside Syria.

Today those estimates are about 200,000 Syrians killed. The humanitarian crisis once thought unimaginable is staggering. One third of the country's 23 million people are estimated to have been displaced, with more than three million of those, refugees outside Syria.

Children, the future of this nation, are hungry and being deprived an education. Now the Syrian opposition is not just battling the regime of Bashar al-Assad. What started as a brave stand against a brutal dictator morphed into a sectarian civil war. Opposition forces have become ever more radicalized and infiltrated by extremist forces.

The Syrian people continue to be victimized and need more international help. Unfortunately, international efforts, albeit more considerable than two years ago, are almost solely geared towards eliminating the terrorist threat, bleeding into neighboring Iraq.

Indeed, even current aid for the armed opposition is directed at training the rebels into a fighting force to combat ISIS forces. Four years ago the American administration called for President Assad to step down. He is still here. Should regime change still govern US policy or is eliminating the extremist threat more important than curbing the bloodshed of Assad's forces?
What more can and should be done to help the opposition? How does the campaign for ISIS fit in? Is enough being done to defeat ISIS? Indeed, can ISIS be defeated without stopping the Syrian Civil War? These are some of the topics we'll address today. We're guaranteed to have a lively discussion, once again.

I think you know the four gentlemen before you could not be more qualified to debate this issue. Each of them has written extensively on Syria and I rely on them for thoughtful analysis in my own work on this complex issue.

Joshua Landis is the director of the Center for Middle-East Studies, an associate professor at the University of Oklahoma. He writes syriacomment.com, a daily newsletter on Syrian policy that attract some 200,000 paid reads a month. It's really one of the most thoughtful blogs out there today that delves into the Syrian crisis.

Aaron David Miller is currently the vice-president for New Initiatives and a distinguished scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Institute, an international center for scholars in Washington. His new book is entitled "Can America Have Another Great President?"

For nearly two decades Aaron has served more than a halve dozen Secretaries of State and advisors in the Middle-East Bureau of the State Department negotiating Middle-East peace, which we can definitely do in another topic. Aaron is one of the most thoughtful writers out there and we speak daily on these issues.

Andrew Tabler is a senior fellow at the program on Arab politics at the Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syrian-US policy in the Levant. He is the co-founder and former editor and chief of Syria today, Syria's first private sector in this language magazine, and someone who I'm really in daily contact with about the events in Syria. One of the strongest voices out there on the need for the US and international community to do more for the Syrian people.

Michael Doran is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute where he specializes in Middle-East security issues. Michael served in the Bush administration as Senior Director in the National Security Council, where he was responsible for helping to devise and coordinate US strategies on various Middle-East issues, including Arab-Israeli relations and efforts to contain Iran and Syria. He's also served in various incarnations of the State Department and Secretary of Defense and travels frequently to the region.

This is how this debate is going to go. The opening argument will be three minutes for each team. Andrew and Michael will kick us off with their argument about why more should be done in Syria. Then we'll hear from Josh and Aaron and their argument on why enough is being done and efforts to go further should be carefully considered.

Each team will have an opportunity to rebut each other's arguments, firmly but respectfully, for two minutes. Then I'll ask some questions with each team, having two minutes maximum to reply.

We're going to take questions from you. We especially want to hear from Syrian-Americans in the audience. We also have scholars from the University of Arizona. Then I will close the debate by asking each panelist for a bottom-line recommendation.
and they'll have a minute for that.

Those of you who have been here with me before knows I'm pretty much a stickler for time. If you're going to go over, you're not going to hear in your ear like I do, a wrap, but at the Navy Memorial, so someone in uniform may escort you out.

[laughter]

**Elise:** Let's get to it with Andrew and Michael about why more should be done in Syria.

**Michael Doran:** Thanks. I'm going to lead off. Thanks very much, Elise and thanks to all of you for coming. Andrew and I believe that the United States should do more in Syria. I'll get to the specifics of what more means in just a moment. But let me first start with an even more basic question.

What is our goal? Our primary aim, everyone now seems to agree, is to defeat the Islamic State. To achieve that aim the Obama administration is following what's being called an Iraq First Strategy.

The administration's plan is to focus now on aiding the Iraqi government while postponing major operations in Syria until later. Let's be clear. This strategy benefits Iran. In Iraq it is Shiites militias that are spearheading the military efforts on the ground. It is Iran who is training, equipping, and sometimes leading those militias. In Syria, with each passing day, the United States grows more closely aligned with Iran's client, Bashar al-Assad. An American official told the "New York Times" recently that US air strikes in Syria were freeing up Assad's forces so that they could more easily destroy the moderate opposition.

Essentially the official said and I quote, "We've allowed the Syrian forces to perform an economy of force. They don't have to be focused all over the country, just on those enemies who threaten their population centers." This policy is misguided. Assad has proved adept at one thing, mass murder. He has destroyed major cities, gassed, tortured and raped on an industrial scale. He has not, however, impeded the Islamic State.

On the contrary, his murder machine is the greatest recruiting tool that the Islamic State possesses. Assad and the Islamic State work together in an evil symbiosis. They are dismembering Syria like jackals. They may eventually fight over the carcass, but they're bringing down their prey together. If we strengthen one jackal, we will not save the victim.

Moreover, Assad's mass murder is sectarian in nature. His victims are overwhelmingly Sunni Muslims. To defeat the Islamic State we need Sunni allies. We need Sunni troops on the ground, inside Syria, and we need Sunni states to support them from outside the country.

Our alignment with Iran however has alienated our traditional allies. They have made it clear that they will not give us their full support, until we adopt a regime change policy in Syria. Forcing Assad to step aside has been our stated policy, and it should remain so, but
we need to be more dedicated to helping Assad find a door.

This does not mean launching a direct American intervention, but it does mean organizing a coalition to fight Assad. The ironclad logic pointing us in the direction of such a policy has been obvious to the national security bureaucracy, but not to the White House, for years.

In 2012, the principle members of the National Security Council unanimously agreed, "Arm the opposition." President Obama said "No." The following year, however, he came around, or at least he seemed to. He approved an initiative to train and equip the Syrian rebels, but then he failed to follow through. Last summer he announced an expansion of that initiative, but then he failed to follow through.

What does doing more in Syria mean? It means following through. It means implementing the policy that already exists on paper. Thank you.

Elise: That was very close to three minutes. Very good. Aaron, you're going to start?

Aaron: Josh and I are going to split up the three minutes. I'm going to try to do mine in 60 seconds.

First, to McCain Institute, thank you so much. I've worked for Rs & Ds, and I've voted for Rs & Ds. I've persuaded the dividing line for American foreign policy. It shouldn't be between left and right, liberal or conservative, or republican and democrat. It should between dumb on one hand, and smart on the other. The McCain Institute affords the space and time to have these issues debated.

Second, Mike, I agree with just about everything that you said. Let me make a few points. The last time we debated should we save Syria. My answer then was we couldn't, we shouldn't, and we wouldn't. About the last, I was absolutely correct.

Tonight, it's something else. It's can we do more? My answer is, absolutely. It was never, and is not now, a question of nodding on one hand, or all in on the other. There is a balance, and we can do more, but more toward one end. That's the key, and Mike identified the issue.

What is the strategy? Is it to eliminate the regime? Is it to defeat ISIS? Is it to transform the nature of the opposition into one that we can support and that shares our values? Is it to stop Iran? Is it to end the civil war? Is it to rebuild Syria, or is it all of the above?

My view bottom-line is forget transformations. This is a region that has problems without solutions. Think outcome, and think transactional objectives, containment, counterterrorism, particularly, with respect to ISIS, supporting the opposition, mobilizing our allies, and getting them to do more, cease fires, if necessary, and keep ISIS at bay.

Last point, even if we wanted to do more, in this audience, this president is risk averse, and capacity notwithstanding, isn't interested in doing more. That reality is one we're going to have to live with for the next 18 months.
Elise: You just ate up all of Josh's time. Go ahead.

Joshua: I think we need to put this in a historical context. What we're seeing in the Middle East today, is a great sorting out, much like the sorting out that happened in central Europe during the Second World War. States built at the same time of the Paris Peace Conference, 1919, borders surrounding multiethnic and multi-religious people.

Poland, before World War Two was 64 percent Pols and the rest minorities. They were all gone by the end of World War II. Czechoslovakia, 33 percent minorities wiped out during World War II.

Homogenous states, nation states and the nation-building process were created through terrible bloodletting, ethnic cleansing, and war. We've seen it in Yugoslavia, most recently, and now going on in Ukraine, to finish out this European sorting out. Eleven states are going through the same process, multiethnic, multi-religious states.

America cannot adjudicate this great sorting out. We tried to do it in the Arab-Israeli conflict, failed. Iraq. If we went into Iraq and tried to throw the Sunnis out, and put the Shiites on top, which is exactly what Michael's asking us to do, in reverse, in Syria.

It failed miserably. 15 of the 20 top leaders of ISIS, today, are Sunni Baathist who got angry. Almost all of them have been in American jails for a long period of time. In Iraq they were the universities of ISIS. We created a holy mess in the region by trying to jiggle around ethnic balance and get in the middle of this great sorting out. We should not do it. We cannot do it. We should try to help.

Elise: Thanks, Josh. Now team Michael and Andrew will have two minute to rebut.

Michael: Thank you, Elise, and thanks for the invitation to be here today. First, there is a great transformation going on in the Fertile Crescent. At first it started in Syria, in many ways, but what's going on inside of Syria, and unfortunately Syria is a lot like Vegas here. It doesn't stay in Syria, and it hasn't. Containment of the Syrian crisis, dealing with the symptoms and not the key components of the disease itself, has just made the world a much less safe place.

Can we do more? Yes. Probably all of us agree on that. The question is what, when, and how. During this process, the debate over this process is about what the United States should do, I think it's not so much about whether the US should give a little more humanitarian assistance or more care for refugees. I think we all can agree on that. But those are just the symptoms. The question is can we get involved inside, at a certain time, at a key moment inside, and tip the balance, or as Josh has often talked about, tipping the scales and putting your thumb on the scales, one way or another, at a key moment.

We've held off from doing that over the last three plus years, even at the expense of the projection of American power with the non-strike incident of 2013, the most famous redline that was drawn and then not enforced.
The idea with not putting your thumb on the scale was very simple, and that is, that by 
not getting involved, by not intervening, by not probing at that key moment, that 
somehow we wouldn't own it, that if we didn't do anything, we wouldn't own it.

I think the attacks that not only did we see in France, but also the beheadings of a number 
of friends of mine, and common friends here in the audience, show us that even if we 
stood by and did nothing, we still own it. We might own it a little bit less, but we still 
own it.

The threats that are coming out of what has become the Islamic State and it's evil 
symbiosis, fighting the Iranian forces inside of Syria and Iraq, we're going to be 
generating more terrorism than I think we've ever seen. To leave it up to law enforcement 
only is a grave mistake.

In order to head-off putting boots on the ground in Syria, taking over those areas 
controlled by ISIS, where the Assad regime cannot and will not go, any time soon, we 
need to act now, in an assertive fashion, by supporting the opposition and supporting the 
overall effort against ISIS. Thank you very much.

Elise: Let's go to Josh.

Joshua: I'm going to take the rebuttal. Today, ISIS owns one-third of all Syria. Nusra 
owns another 10 percent, but it dominates almost all of the other militias. The militias 
that America has won its support probably have one percent, maybe less than one percent, 
of Syria. To turn them into winners is going to cost a hundred-million dollars, not three 
million.

If America is not willing to spend this kind of money, it shouldn't get into the fight. 
Today, the United States cannot transform that landscape. ISIS and Nusra dominate the 
Syrian scene. If we try to take out the Assad regime, who is going to take Damascus? It's 
going to be Nusra and ISIS. That's why the United States has refused Turkey's and Saudi 
Arabia's request for us to attack Assad at the same time as we attack ISIS.

If Damascus were to fall, and the major population centers, they would be wiped clean of 
minorities. The Islamic front, Zahran Alloush, has called for the impurities of [inaudible 
00:28:59] and the filthy Shiites to be cleaned out of greater Syria. Al-Qaida and ISIS, we 
know where they stand. If we get into the middle of this ethnic fight and we take down 
the Assad regime, and it is a brutal, horrible regime, there is going to be major ethnic 
cleansing.

There are three million Alawites. There are eight percent Christians, Druze. They will be 
wiped out. America does not want to get into the Middle East. Sure, Sunnis are being 
killed today in great numbers, but the United States can't fire up that ethnic battle, and it 
shouldn't throw arms into a terrible situation.

Elise: I'd like you start off on the idea of should we be having a policy designed, should 
the policy be about ISIS, or should the policy be to change the balance of power against 
Assad first?
Today, Aaron had a very timely piece entitled "Why the US prefers Assad to Syria," saying, "Indeed the administration has identified ISIS as an eminent threat far more likely to strike US interest than is Mr. Assad." Aaron, why don't you start the argument there? Should we have that type of policy against Assad, or why do prefer that Assad stay in power?

Aaron: Listening to this discussion, I'm puzzled, because I'm trying to identify where the four of us really differ.

Michael: I'll help you with that.

[laughter]

Aaron: We're all interested in supporting the opposition. We're all interested in intensifying the fight against ISIS. The issues here are, are we interested in using air power and a direct application of the American military power against the regime, and if we're not, are we interested in creating no-fly zones? Are we interested in providing ground to air missile systems to the opposition?

I raise this point, you don't have to answer it now, where in essence do we fundamentally disagree? We all agree more needs to be done, the question is toward what end?

Just one additional point, Elise. Whether we should or can are not the only questions. It's whether we will. My piece today tried to lay out that you have a very risk averse president, and governing is about choosing. It always is on domestic and foreign policy.

You have a president that is willfully, willfully avoiding militarizing the American role in Syria, until it coincided with an objective that he felt comfortable with. That objective happened to coincide sadly, tragically with the rise of ISIS as a threat to our position in Iraq, in response to be-headings of Americans, and in response to Chuck Hagel's comment that ISIS provided, this was several months ago already, an imminent threat to the United States.

It's a counter-terrorism policy that this president has pursued, a containment policy, not a nation-building policy. I suspect that's why the preference is for balance of power politics. He would agree with Josh, President Obama. You want to get rid of Assad, fine. You tell me what is to stop ISIS from taking over its first major Arab capital. What is to stop it? That in essence clarifies part of the differences that I think separate us.

Elise: Michael, why don't you pick up on that specifically, A, does the US prefer Assad and if so, why shouldn't they? I mean it does make a compelling point. If US policy is about National Security interests, is the threat here and the threats post by ISIS or this type of extremist groups and the threats post to Iraq, does that outweigh the threat post by Assad?

Michael: Part about what Aaron did was to predict what President Obama...

Elise: I don't want to know what he will do. I want to know what he should do.
**Michael:** Let's forget about those. Let's talk about what we should do. We've got a problem from Baghdad to Aleppo, maybe further Baghdad to Beirut. We have Jihadistan there. The question is what are we going to do about Jihadistan? Is an alignment with an Iranian proxy in Baghdad and an Iranian proxy in Damascus going to contain Jihadistan and make it better or is it going to make it worse?

What Andrew and I are arguing is that the very policy of aligning with Assad, which is what Josh proposed two years ago and what he's still proposing now...I realized, Josh, you didn't say that's aligned with Assad. You said "Let's just stay out" which means "Let's align with Assad."

**Elise:** I'll give you the extra time. But what Josh said, I think that I remember this is that he said, "Listen, if you get rid of Assad, who's going to be standing at the end? It's not going to be the democratic position. It's going to be the guys with the guns."

**Michael:** What I'm saying how do we get allies to pacify Jihadistan? Jihadistan is Sunni territory. We can't pacify it without Sunni allies. Our current policy has alienated all the Sunnis in the region. The argument that you guys have to answer is how are we going to take of Jihadistan with no Sunnis on our side? That is what you have to answer.

**Elise:** Josh.

**Joshua:** I proposed on the Fareed Zakaria show that you get Turkey to occupy entire Sunni north. Yes, and keep Assad because otherwise you have to go to war against Iran and you have to go to war against Russia.

**Elise:** Are they really in a tank for Assad or is it the regime that they want?

**Joshua:** It's all at one.

**Elise:** Is it?

**Joshua:** Yes, it is one. Assad and the regime are one. The regime is about loyalty to the men. If you take the men off the top of the regime, all those Alawite generals believe they can run the country better than Assad. They just can't figure out how to get there. They will all fight each other and they will become as dysfunctional and inter-fighting as the Sunnis have become.

**Michael:** What's your answer to Jihadistan? That's the question.

**Joshua:** Turkey has to occupy the whole place, take weapons away. They won't do it. They won't do it and America won't do it.

**Elise:** Whoa, guys, back in your corners.

**Joshua:** The point is that nobody's going to occupy that territory.

**Elise:** Let's get into the allies in a minute. I want to continue on this idea of Assad and the balance of power. Andrew, let's talk more about building up the Syrian opposition. Is there a Syrian opposition that could even govern Syria? Can Syria even survive as a
Andrew Tabler: There are organized elements to the opposition. Are they organized into something they could take over the Syrian state and the Sunnis' treaty obligations? No. I think the answer to a lot of these questions, we need to get to Iran's peace and look at the fact in terms of the army of the opposition to get to your question. Why do men who's so reticent, the great extractor you called in the last debate, I think...

[crosstalk]

Elise: Extractor in Chiefs.

Andrew: I'm sorry. I was reading under the rest. He finally decided that he was going to not just train and equip the rebels, which he's been doing covertly for a few years, but have title ten program, an official program by the US government, $500 million which is not the largest program in the world, but still why did he finally decide to do that?

Because the dynamic had changed inside of Syria and this is the reason why it's no longer just ISIS versus Assad, although, I can understand why you're looking at in the pieces that way, the two great enemies of the United States inside of one country. But because the regime is crippled, in the old days, we would simply switch back to dealing with the Assad. That's what we always do.

I've written about this quite in my book and you can see it overtime. We confronted the Assad regime, isolated it, pressured it, and then sometimes we constructively engaged it. That was the policy that fell apart at the beginning of the uprisings. The fact is, is that the regime is crippled, financially, militarily, and politically. Militarily, we can see how much of the country it controls.

Josh has written this piece recently at the end of the year, a very comprehensive piece, that the regime is not going to be able to go and retake those areas of Syria that are currently held by ISIS. Financially, of course, in very bad shape due to variety of factors and politically bankrupted. There's no way that the Assad regime is going to be able to reform.

It has not been able to reform when things were good. It's not going to be able to reform when things now are very bad. The Syrian regime doesn't control all the territory...it doesn't control its territory as it did in the past. Therefore, we need a more nuance strategy. One that deals with the fact that Syria is divided and will remain divided for the foreseeable future.

The reason why we need to arm the opposition now is because we need them to build up a coherent force with a political structure that would be able to take over the Sunni-dominated areas of Syria from which is controlled by ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra now. I think it really now comes down to a matter of sequencing. The only way that I see the pieces of Syria going back together again is with President Assad's departure and his cousins, the Makhlouf's.

Elise: Aaron, are the attacks on ISIS enough to get rid of Assad or is it helping him stay
in power, or is getting rid of Assad actually necessary to defeat ISIS?

Aaron: I come back to this stunning reality that just pervades my entire view of this region. It's in the process of a fundamental transformation.

Elise: But do you need Assad to go to transform?

Aaron: In fact, they haven't even called for which is what I was anticipating, which is a willful application of American military power. If you wanted to get rid of Assad and the Alawite regime, you could do it. In three months, you could probably do it by striking leadership targets, air assets. I mean, come on, the military does this stuff incredibly well.

It's the politics and the day after problem that we don't do well. This president looking at these trillion dollars social science experiments called...no, it's not funny because it involved the deaths of thousands of, not to mention the Iraqis and the Afghans, the deaths of thousands of Americans in a policy which demonstrated that even with 140,000 forces, trillions of dollars expended, and what remains of American credibility, we have fundamentally failed to achieve what it is we wanted to do.

Mike, just to anticipate, I'm not hammering Bush 43 for whom I worked for getting us into this and I'm not hammering Barack Obama who may have headed for the exits too quickly. But neither of them thought these things through. That is my point.

If you guys are predicating a policy, which involves the application of American military force in a major way, which neither of you have even identified which is something I don't understand because if you want Assad gone, if you want to put your finger on the scale, your thumbs on the scales, Andrew, then let's have it out now because we could do it.

Elise: Mike, quick rebuttal and then I want to move on to Iran.

Michael: Three points. First, the issue isn't taking down Assad. The issue is building a new order in Jihadistan. When I listened to you guys talk, it's as if we didn't have the last six months in the Middle East. The president is at war again. United States is at war again in Iraq and in Syria.

Elise: But do you need to get rid of Assad to do that?

Michael: We cannot mobilize Sunni allies to build a new order in this unsettled region from Baghdad to Aleppo without Sunni allies. As long as we're in alignment with Iran, we have no allies for doing this. Your policy of stepping back is one that gives us only the unilateral military option. That's it.

If we want others on the ground to do our work for us, to shoulder some of the burdens, and to look after our interest on the ground, then we have to take into consideration their world view, their consideration, their interest, and we have to align our policy with their interest.

I want allies. I don't want multi-trillion dollar invasions, unilateral invasions by the
United States. I want allies. The allies that Barack Obama has chosen, the allies that you guys are saying we should choose without admitting the choice are Iran and Assad. The do-nothing policy is an Iran benefit policy and it won't work. It simply will not work.

Aaron: Right. Just consider one other point. This president has another priority.

Michael: Forget about him. We're done.

Aaron: No, but this is the point.

Michael: He's got nothing to do with this.

Aaron: You look to analyze regional realities without considering Washington realities.

Michael: In two years, there's going to be a new reality. We're laying the basis to the new reality right here.

Aaron: Until it is conclusively demonstrated, and you'll love this one, that the P5+1 and Iran cannot reach an agreement on the nuclear issue, this president is not going to fundamentally challenge the Iranians in Syria.

Joshua: Let me just jump on the Sunni question.

Elise: Just very quickly. I really want to move on to some more of the Iran issue.

Joshua: Your argument is that we have to hurt Iran and help the Saudis. We have to balance. Those are both very sectarian powers. We cannot choose one over the other. We have to balance them.

Elise: Josh, let me ask you. Is the real fight here with Iran and not ISIS? Should we more be moving towards weakening Iran's reach in the Middle East or can we even choose between these fights, Iran and ISIS?

Joshua: There are Shiites and Sunnis fighting each other in Bahrain, in Yemen, all over the place. We cannot pick sides in this ethnic battle.


Joshua: No, I didn't.

Michael: You did.

[crosstalk]


Michael: The neutral choice doesn't exist.

Joshua: Let me finish. Subhi Samarai, the teacher and mentor of the new caliph of ISIS, trained in Saudi Arabia. The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia said he was one of the greatest minds in Iraq. This guy's taught in most of the big universities in Saudi Arabia. He is the
mentor of ISIS, very anti-Shiite. He spearheaded the whole notion of the Rawafed and how they're terrible to Shiites. You are trying to martial up a power that's spreading this anti-Shiite stuff and say, "Go at them. We're going to give you guns, go kill them."

Elise: You say we're taking sides in this.

Joshua: We don't want to, We want to balance. These are two very sectarian parties. You cannot be anti-Iran or pro-Saudi Arabia. You have to balance the two. There are Shiites and Sunnis in the Middle East. You can't just wipe one out.

Elise: Michael, do you want to quickly...?

Michael: You can't just wipe one out. The policy of doing nothing led to the dislocation of nearly other 50 percent of the population of Syria, which is Sunni Muslim. I'm talking about restoring a balance. I'm talking about working with the power that tied off a cord in Lebanon. Saudi Arabia...

Elise: Yeah, but listen. The Saudis...

[laughter]

Michael: Elise, who's side are you on?

[laughter]

Elise: I'm an equal opportunity offender.

Michael: You put your thumb on...

Elise: No, I'm an equal opportunity offender here. Let's be honest. The Saudis and...why do the Sunnis...

Michael: I remember Candy Crowley and President Obama and the debate in London.

Elise: Why do the Sunnis want the US, they want to use the US as a proxy against Iran? It's not only about altruism to the Syrian people here.

Michael: No, sure.

Elise: Should we let them use us to get into war with Iran?

Michael: No, it doesn't mean they're using us. We know what their intentions are and we know what the Assad regime wants. The Assad regime wants us to say stay out, go away, leave it alone, don't get in this sectarian mess which is a pro-Shiite position. Josh is pretending that there's some kind of neutral position where we can be white in a world of colors. We can't. We have to decide what our interests are.

We have to look at the powers that are at play and we have to fasten the course that will allow us to secure our interest. What I'm saying is that our interest is to destroy the Islamic state, can't be done without Sunni allies and doing nothing, which is what we did for the last two years, didn't work. When the president turned around and ISIS took
Mosul, that was the moment when your policy proposal failed. Now, we need a new strategy.

**Elise:** Andrew, let's restart the clock. Can we deal with Syria without dealing with the whole issues of Iraq, the Kurds, Turkey and Iran and the Lebanon, all of this multitude of issues? Is it really just about Syria and the Civil War or do we need to be thinking bigger here?

**Andrew:** No, we have to think beyond that because the Syria has not been about Syria for a couple of years. It's pretty clear one of my colleagues here in the audience here tracks Jihadis. We can see already how the different pieces have been moving around the region. Hassan Nasrallah's dramatic speech concerning Quasar and Hezbollah's intervention inside of Syria against another Arab country led to a huge fight in Jihadis coming into the country.

Then with the attack on Mosul, the withdraw of Iraqi militias back to Iraq to defend those areas led to regime losses in Syria. Here's where it all comes together. Assad's comeback in Syria has been heavily supported by the Islamic Republic of Iran. It's undeniable. What it means strategically, where you want to go with it, that's another debate.

But it is undeniable, the level of IRGC involvement, their training of the national defense forces who now make up a lion share of deaths of those killed inside of Syria who are armed on this regime side, plus the deployment of Hezbollah in unprecedented numbers. At the moment, we have units seizing Aleppo, a huge Sunni city, with Shia from Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, from throughout the region. This would all makes sense, right? This seems like a great coin strategy and we've done lots of coin.

**Elise:** Not successfully.

**Andrew:** Not necessarily successfully. What about when the numbers are really heavily skewed against you? We're not talking about a balance here. Syria is not 50 percent Shia and 50 percent Sunni. It's 70-75 percent Sunni, 16 percent Shia, and then we have others. This is where it gets to the heart of question. In a way, it seems very safe to give Assad a free pass, allow him to carry out his activities.

But in a way, it not only kills more and more Syrians and makes the situation much worse. But this crisis draws in more Jihadis and then sets off this regional configuration, the one that we're trying to deal with. We're not going to be able to deal with it until we deal with the heart of that crisis. It's there where we need to understand that we're not balancing Sunnis and Shia here. Iran intervened inside of Syria long ago. It is undeniable.

The problem we had is Sunni society has responded. We need Sunni states and our allies to respond. The only way we can do that, and the area is controlled by ISIS, is to train and equip members of the Syrian opposition and introduce them back inside of Syria in a short term eventually leading to a political settlement in Syria. Hopefully, that would see the departure of the Assad regime. How you get there, getting to Aaron's points, could involved military force.
Elise: Aaron, do you want to...?

Aaron: I'm looking for honesty and clarity here and this entire debate isn't producing it. I mean you want Assad gone and your road to do that is to make this coalition of the unwilling, the semi-interested, the disabled into a coalition of the willing.

You are relying on states that inherently have their own interests and their own narrow agendas including the Turks and the Saudis who would love nothing more than to drag us in to an open-ended military confrontation with the regime, and in the process have us own Syria. Frankly, I don't think that is in our national interest.

Elise: Because you've written a lot about this, I want to talk about Iran and ISIS. Can you choose between these fights? Are you fighting both? Is the real fight here with Iran and not ISIS?

Aaron: I'll say it again, every president confronts this. Governing is about choosing. This president has identified a nuclear agreement with Iran as a critically important piece.

Elise: Is that more important that the Jihadist threat though?

Aaron: No. I would argue Barack Obama is basically pursuing two rather discrete lines of policy. One is doing counter-terrorism against ISIS. Maybe it's not effective. The second is pursuing a negotiated solution. I'm not sure he's going to get there with the Iranians on the nuclear issue. What he's not doing is embracing the course that Michael and Andrew wanting to embrace.

Elise: Everyone wants to weigh in on this point. These are two separate and distinct policies. You don't want to talk really with Iran about ISIS because you really want their acquiescence on a nuclear deal.

Aaron: That could come. Look, I'm not pushing this point, but it could come.

Michael: I want to ask him to clarify. If I understood you correctly, are you saying that President Obama is carrying out a, for all intents and purposes, pro-Iran policy in Syria so as to woo Iran on the nuclear deal? Is that what you're saying?

Aaron: No.

Michael: I just want to understand you. I'm not trying to make an argument. I want to understand how you understand the cross currents between the two.

Aaron: There are three pieces here.

Andrew: And how does he understand the cross currents?

Aaron: I've got the great, the extracator in chief who's willfully avoided militarizing the American role in Syria basically started to militarize it. Not in response to the sufferings of the Syrian people. Not in response to Assad's atrocities, but in response to the fact that ISIS emerged to threaten American equities in Iraq and it started beheading Americans.
You had Chuck Hagel and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, not more than two months ago, talk about ISIS as the new imminent threat to the homeland. That piece is what energized this president on the issue of militarizing. Now he hasn't done it the way you guys want him to do it. But he's militarized our role in Syria.

Second, he's pursuing a policy that wants to preempt and is readily strike and prevent an American one before he leaves office. Both of those objectives are being pursued in parallel lines.

Elise: I want to give Josh the rest of the time.

Joshua: First of all, we're not pursuing a pro Iran Policy. We've got crashing sanctions on Assad Regime. We have given almost $3 billion to the Syrian opposition, training them and equipping them to kill Assad Regime people. We are sanctioning Iran. We are against Iran. We are not with Iran. I don't understand where that comes from.

Secondly, who are we going to arm amongst the Syrian opposition? Everybody has been saying we should arm the Syrian opposition. Andrew wrote a long article in Foreign Affairs about a year and a half ago saying Agidi is our man because people said name one person you could arm. The problem is the Syrian opposition has been so fragmented and so in little pieces that there isn't a way to get them together.

Clinton cut her teeth on trying to get the friends of Syria and get them to unite. We failed. We could not do it. Agidi, who Andrew said we should give him. We'd given him all of our non-lethal aid. We should give him our lethal aid. He was the head guy in Aleppo under the supreme military command, Idris. Agidi had been on tons of YouTubes saying America is really against the Muslims when he was recruiting money from other Muslim.

These are published on the Internet. He said America is against to Sunnis and they’re in a secret alliance with the Shiites, with Iran, Hisbala, and then he said even Assad. "Why are there no Shiites in Guantanamo," he said, "Why are there no Shiite malicious on the terrorist list?" He went down a list of complaints to say that America was trying to kill Sunni Muslims and was secretly in alliance. This is the person that Andrew advocated, making our point now for receiving the lethal aid.

Elise: OK.

Joshua: We have not found the people that we want to support. The CIA has been trying to find them, and they're not out there.

Andrew: We didn't support them. He made those statements before...

Joshua: After.

Andrew: He made those statements also after we didn't support him. It is a very complicated. Josh is partially correct though...

Elise: He makes a good point though. Like there is no alternative.

Joshua: It's true, because people in the Middle East, just like us, we respond to
consistency. If we are interested in achieving a plan, we outline a plan, we stake it out, we have to follow through on that plan, and we didn't. We didn't concerning the non-strike incident of 2013. That was enormously damaging.

**Elise:** Chemical warfare.

**Joshua:** Exactly. In that environment, what happened very, and as you can all see Jihad's filled the vacuum, because now we own it. We do. They filled that vacuum.

If we'd trained up and supported those units back when I wrote that article on foreign affairs, would there be no Jihads in Syria? No. I'm not arguing that. Would there be less? Yes, I do. I believe that. I think that part of the responsibility was ours. We can't fix Syria, but we do need allies to put the pieces of that country back together again.

Because if continue to let it fragment, as it has been, we're going to have a configuration that not only explodes in the center of the Middle East, but can spread throughout the world. I don't want to see that. I've had too many of my friends die, over the last few years, to want to see that conflict expand.

First of all, I think it's terrible. I don't want any minorities to be killed, but the number of Sunnis that have been slaughtered throughout Syria, and this wouldn't be a problem, but Syria is 75 percent Sunni. That's a huge political problem. The Middle East, the core of the Middle East, plus turkey, is roughly the same demographics as Syria. Syria is a microcosm for the region.

We have a Sunni problem, ladies and gentlemen. They're the majority in the region, and they're mad as hell. It's not because our forces are just in the Arabian Peninsula, and it's not just because we support Israel. They're mad about those things, too. They're really mad because we stood by and did little or nothing in the face of horrific slaughter, and now they're going to make us pay.

**Elise:** I'm going to ask one more question touching upon that, and then we have a good half hour for audience questions. Josh, why don't you talk about this, because you are very in-depth about Syria. I think we've have lost sight of the moral component here.

Has the International Community in the fight against ISIS, in this campaign against what Michael called Jihadjstan, completely forgotten that 200,000 Syrians have been killed, 3 million refugees? This seems to be about cold, hard national security calculations, and the Syrian people are suffering.

**Joshua:** They are suffering. They were suffering in Iraq before we went and destroyed the Iraqi regime many more people suffered. You can make things worse.

**Elise:** How can it be much worse?

**Joshua:** It can be tons worse. It can be a lot worse than it is now, and it's going to get worse, unfortunately. America, to arm-up these fragmented militias is not going to make the place better. Everybody argues that if we'd just moved quickly, Syria would have been better. That is a false notion. We moved quickly in Iraq. We destroyed the Iraqi state and
Sudan's army before the opposition had to shoot a shot.

What happened, within two years al-Qaida was crawling all over the country, and it's expanded into Syria. Look at Libya. We wiped out Kaddafi like that. What happened? Did democrats take over and the liberals take over? No. the liberals got chased out of town, and now you've got tons of little militias that are fighting against each other, and it's a race to the bottom.

Syria is a race to the bottom. Not because America didn't come in and give arms to Agidi or somebody else. It's because the Syrians don't have a national cohesion. Unfortunately, the militias are organized town-by-town basis, a clan-by-clan basis and they're all fighting each other for power. America could not have given them that cohesion. They're going to have to find it themselves.

**Elise:** All right. Guys, let's reset the clock. You guys figure it out. Michael, you might want to say something.

**Michael:** I think I should take a minute, 50 seconds, and you 10.

[laughter]

**Michael:** Go ahead. I'll take a minute, you take a minute.

**Andrew:** First of all, in general Agidi is an example of a supreme military council, which was organized by our government, covertly, with our allies, and that structure was not backed.

I think it's very difficult to demonstrate on a physical plan of reality that if we'd done more, or less, in Syria we would have been worse, or whatever. There are things that could have happened. They didn't happen. I think that given these units are on individual, town-by-town, region-by-region, I think that we could have brought them over towards the United States and toward our allies, and away from the Jihadis.

That didn't happen now we have to deal with that reality. I still don't understand who defeats ISIS. That's the problem because the regime can't. If we let up on it, and we have a couple of ceasefires, there's been a very famous article written by a [inaudible 01:01:51] , 55 pages, outlining what the regime's been putting forward over the last few years. Not always, but in part, that the idea was to have some local ceasefires, have some raw autonomy, and there'd be gradual reform.

That's not going to happen. That's not going to work. It's only going to work over parts of the country where the regime is strong. The rest of the country where ISIS exists, the regime is not going to be in a position to go into those areas. That's the problem we have.

To get back to my original point that, and this gets back to the article that Josh quoted, we need to deal with Syria as a divided country, to work towards the process that puts the pieces of the country back together again at the end. We're years away from that. In the meantime we're going to suffer from a lot of death and destruction in the Middle East and
a hell of a lot of terrorism.

**Michael:** You took a minute 50.

**Elise:** Michael, you are going to follow up, and then Aaron. And then we are moving on to the audience.

**Michael:** Your argument comes down to a very, very simple argument. Your argument is if we do nothing that's the best way to deal with the Islamic state in Syria. That's what your argument comes down to.

**Elise:** His question is about the more open...

[crosstalk]

**Andrew:** Who made that argument?

[crosstalk]

**Michael:** Yeah, that's what you are saying.

**Josh:** Whoever said about doing nothing against ISIS, I would actually intensify.

**Michael:** Let me answer the moral argument. Security comes before morality. We have morals and we care about them. They're very important. Alleviating the suffering of Syrians is extremely important, but we're not going to do anything on a purely moral basis if it isn't within a framework that looks after our core security interests. So let's start with that, and then we'll talk about the morality.

**Aaron:** I am much tougher on this, on the morality arguments than you are. Our policy is not immoral. It's amoral. It's an amoral policy, because it allows...

**Michael:** As Andrew said, I still haven't heard what your idea is for defeating ISIS. How hanging back from Syria allows us to defeat ISIS in Syria? How does that play itself out?

**Aaron:** The president talks about, ultimately defeating ISIS.

**Michael:** I am asking you, not Barack Obama.

**Aaron:** No. I mentioned to you guys earlier, that if in fact, our own intel establishes the connection between AQAP and the Paris attacks, if in fact they do, and it has not yet been done, it will validate a reality that contradicts the whole notion of "defeating" these groups.

We are 15 years almost in wake of 9/11, and an Al Qaeda affiliate may have undertaken the worst terrorist attack against Europe in 10 years, since 2005, you cavalierly talk about "defeating" these groups. We haven't even take care of old business yet, with respect to Al Qaeda.

**Michael:** How do we protect ourselves chasing the balance of power against it? Can we
leave an Al Qaeda safe haven in the heart of the Arab world and we just leave it alone?

**Aaron:** You are going to have to continue to do counter terrorism, and containment for...

**Elise:** Containment of a group that's running a country?

**Aaron:** It's a generational proposition, what will defeat Al Qaeda or ISIS in Iraq, is good governance on both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian border. If you think that we are anywhere close to creating the kind of security, cohesion, equitable distribution of power in Syrian-Iraq or fund them or weaken...

**Michael:** How do we make that happen?

**Elise:** We are going to open it up to the audience. If you have a question...

**Aaron:** [inaudible 01:05:45].

[laughter]

**Elise:** I'd like to open it up to the audience, a reminder that we are tweeting this event, the hashtag is MiDebateSyria, and if you have a question, I'd like you to announce your name and affiliation. And please keep it to a question, not a pontification, and we'll try to get as many as we can. I'd like to hear from some Syrian-Americans in the room, and...

[laughter]

**Elise:** OK. I am going to go right here, but again, we are going to keep it short, and each team will have two minutes to respond.

**Michael:** This guy's a ringer for Josh.

**Mohammad Al Abdallah:** No. I am in there for [inaudible 01:06:33]. My name is Mohammad Al Abdallah, I am a former prisoner in Syria. I am activist, I am director of Syria Justice & Accountability Center, [inaudible 01:06:39]. You wanted [inaudible 01:06:41] Syria, the Southern Syria, there's Sunni dominant again, you get Idlib, Hama, Homs, Damascus suburbs, Connaitra, and Damascus.

What will prevent the Sunnis in these Southern Syria, keeping your friend Assad there, why they not going to rebel against this guy again? To the Sunni thing here, the problem with Iraq, we got ISIS in Iraq, we got Khalifa there, his name Omar al-Baghdadi, don't know if they share the last name.

We were not able to defeat them till we bring the Sahwa, the Sunnis to fight them. And when, Jaish al-Mujahideen defeated ISIS in December 2013, and January 2014, all the Sunni fighters defeated ISIS, and kicked them out. They taking flag of ISIS, and putting the revolution flag back in Idlib suburb, [inaudible 01:07:27]. How you can defeat ISIS without those people?

That's an evidence actually, we document this in our world. That's an evidence that the Sunni in these areas are actually working to defeat ISIS, if they have somebody to help
them on the ground. And the drone, I am sorry, you cannot do this. We tried to do in Iraq, and we failed as American.

The Jihad in Iraq came because of Iran and Syria, we have thousands of documents, showing their Jihadi shipment from Syria to Iraq. And we all know this, and I am sorry to say this, to be honest here, by describing the policy of the US, not pro Iran policy, that favoring the Shia and ignoring what they are doing.

You criticize Agidi, which is a valid point, but you want his government supporting him Turkey, to go outside and invade Syria. One line, we cannot ignore that Agidi was fighting against ISIS with the courts in [inaudible 01:08:26] using the Turkish support, and the US air support.

Elise: OK. Josh. Two minutes.

Joshua: The reason I suggested this division of Syria is not because it's just. It's because, in theory, this whole state that ISIS has created, stretching from Baghdad to Aleppo, should be...It has meaning, because people embraced ISIS, because they were pressed by two sectarian regimes, and all those Sunnis are caught in a vice grip between sectarian Shia regimes.

They embraced ISIS. America should not be bombing ISIS to split it back. If you were going to have a just area, you would allow all those Sunnis to create a state, stretching from Aleppo to Baghdad. We are not going to do it, because we believe in those state lines, and nobody wants to split the Sunnis from Iraq. So we can't do it.

That's what should happen. The closest thing that I thought could happen, was to encourage the Turks to come in and take the top. That way you don't go to war against Iran and Russia. Iran and Russia would probably be happy to have Turkey and the Sunnis owning the top, if they wouldn't invade them.

They are exhausted. They don't have more money. The Shiites are terrified that they are going to get wiped out. If you can give them a teeny bit of an assurance, they'll probably say, "Take the rest of the country, because we are never going to be able to re-conquer it."

The Russians would pressure Assad. The Iranians would too, because they don't have money to keep on fighting this war. It would give everybody something. It wouldn't give them enough, and it wouldn't be complete justice. But it was a way to stop the killing.

Turkey is never going to go in and invade Syria, because Syria is 90 percent below the poverty line. It's got no money, the education system is broken. Everything in Syria is broken. Nobody wants to go in there, nobody is going to spend a dime on Syria. And that's the terrible truth, is that no one is going to fix Syria, because they are not stupid.

It's expensive, and the Syrians are not unified. So, there are going to be stuck inside a country, at civil war until they compose their own differences. That's the terrible reality, and we can pontificate about it, but that's what is going to happen.
Elise: OK. Thanks, Josh. Andrew, do you want to respond?

Andrew: No.

[laughter]

Andrew: I am trying to think. That was a long question and a long response.

Mohammad Al Abdallah: [inaudible 01:10:59].

Elise: We got to move on...

Andrew: Let's move to the next question.

Elise: Mike, quickly.

Michael: No. Let's go to another question. I agree with the gentleman. I thought he was...

Elise: We are going to go to this woman right here, and then we are going right here.

Audience Member: Thank you everyone for such an interesting debate, I am [inaudible 01:11:18]. I am a Syrian activist, and I am a political refugee in the US, because of this regime. I work currently, at the Washington institute. My question is actually, to Mr. Landis. You mentioned that the US government going quickly into the region meaning we can't do that or we can't afford that anymore, and you are actually referencing to boots on the ground.

I have always been against arming the rebels or moving towards having boots on the ground, because I know that this is going to be causing more bloodshed. But is anybody talking about no fly zone? Is anybody considering that we waited so long here in the US to respond to the Syrian crisis? Also, another point, is anybody talking about the Alawite division in the community?

Sorry, but Assad is not having a full support within his own community and I wrote about this in Foreign Affairs as well. The Alawite community is very divided right now, and this guy is standing alone. This is very crucial issue actually to consider and to talk about. Thank you very much.

Joshua: The Alawite community is divided. There's no doubt about it. People are sick and tired of this war. Over 40,000 Alawite soldiers have been killed and many other. They would love to stop. They don't know how to stop. Because the major powers, Sunni powers on the ground, they don't trust them to stop because they've called...they believe they're going to be wiped out. That may be faults and they may have just a wrong notion.

But unfortunately, they support Assad, not because they love him but because they're terrified of the enemy. They believe that if they turn against Assad, they're going to get wiped out. They may be wrong, but unfortunately that's where we are in Syria and without some kind of safety. This is why you'd need an international community to occupy Syria and take the armies away. Just arming up one side is not going to stop the
Audience Member: [inaudible 01:13:25].

Joshua: I know you do.

Elise: Michael, do you want to respond?

Michael: No, that's fine.

Elise: Andrew?

Andrew: No, that's great.

Mohammad Ghanem: My name is Mohammad Ghanem. I'm the director of government relations with the Syrian American Council. I'm also a former professor at the University of Damascus, lived there for 28 years. I have a question for Josh.

You said that FSA controls about less than one percent or about one percent in Syria. That's actually factually not correct because a larger Syrian coalition is in the south. It controls more of the province of Daraa than Assad. They're about 35 kilometers, but that's not the question.

The question is the following. In 2012, when the rebels controlled about 50 percent of Syria, you had the same opposition. You said you should not support the rebels. Now, you're saying they're only controlled about one percentage so it can't make them winners.

The opposition, when the rebels controlled more than 50 percent mainstream rebels, more than 50 percent of Syria remains in the north and east, is the same as it is now. I think that advocating hands of approach to Syria led to ISIS capturing east in Syria, crossing the border into Mosul, and that led to a mass exodus of Christians. They painted all their houses with "Nun." That means Nasarah or Christians. The "let's do nothing" about Syria actually led to this crisis of...

Elise: What's your question?

Mohammad Ghanem: The question is don't you think that doing the same thing again and again, advocating the same thing again and again, although I have seen the results, is like doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results is a definition of insanity? Thanks.

[laughter]

Joshua: America destroyed the Iraqi regime and it destroyed the Libyan regime. We got chaos and we got what we have in Syria today. That's the insane. It's trying to do this. It's destroyed the Syrian regime and expects the Syrians to compose their differences and stop fighting.

I don't think they will. I think that America should not assist in that effort. Already, two years ago when the Islamic front was formed and it is your mainstream rebel, the leaders
of the Islamic front called for ethnically cleansing all the Shiites from Syria. That's why I didn't want to arm them because...

[off-mic question]

**Joshua:** His speeches are already in 2012. He went in Lebanese TV and said, Zahran Alloush, "I don't believe in democracy. It's a ruse by the west for the strong to...

**Mohammad Ghanem:** What did he say from prison?

**Joshua:** Who released it? Baghdadi from prison. Who leaves all ISIS from prison? Americans. Yes, Assad released them from prison. It's true. Who asked for him to be released from prison? You, the human rights workers asked for him because he was illegally...he was a political prisoner.

[laughter]

**Mohammad Ghanem:** You're being dishonest.

**Joshua:** No, I'm not being dishonest.

**Mohammad Ghanem:** You are being dishonest. With all due respect, from...I remember I wrote to you on Facebook. You wrote a bad article in the second week called "Deeply Sectarian" that still hang in your blog at the second week. You wrote to Time Magazine saying Assad was shoved at the level of the brutality of his intelligence. That's your article in Time Magazine. We have accountability. You guys at the lecture should hold accountable for...

**Joshua:** I said it was deeply sectarian. It was going to become Deeply Sectarian. Everyone said, "Don't say that. It's not going to...that's not true."

**Elise:** Let's keep it respectful and civil.

**Joshua:** It has become deeply sectarian.

**Mohammad Ghanem:** [inaudible 01:17:03].

**Elise:** We're going to keep it respectful and civil and we all appreciate each other's opinions, and we appreciate yours certainly, OK.

**Mohammad Ghanem:** Thank you.

**Elise:** Now, Michael.

**Michael:** Josh keeps referring back to the Iraq war and toppling Saddam saying, "We don't want to repeat that again." The issue of making regime change or policy is not to rush in and to go topple Assad. Aaron, you asked about what kind of military force you want to use. I think the first step is the conceptual step. It's the paradigm step.

Understanding what you guys are advocating is in fact a pro-Iranian, pro-Assad position whether you call it that or not and it will just lead to more of the same that we have seen.
We have to have a regime change policy in a sense that we had a regime change policy against the Soviet Union for 40 years. It doesn't mean we rush our military to topple the Soviet Union.

Regime change is the principle that we use in order to organize the forces that exist in that region and to direct them in ways that will be more beneficial to everybody in the region and to ourselves. We want to mobilize the energy, the resources, and the interests of the major powers around Syria. We cannot do that so long as we are perceived as having a policy that is beneficial to Assad.

We have to change that perception. Now, as far as what we do militarily, the president can decide to do...he could have regime change light and he could have regime change heavy. When I say heavy, he could go in with no fly zones and a more muscular use of American force or he could go light. He could simply organize the coalition. He could organize the Syrian units.

He could provide logistics and intelligence and so on. But the key first is the conceptual one, to understand that as long as we are in this alignment that we're in, the problem is going to get worse. You guys still haven't argued how your favored policy works to a more beneficial situation for the United States. I don't see it. I don't see more of the same as looking at through our...

Elise: This is what we're going to do. We're going to do three very quick questions. I'm going to take them all at once and then we're going to give each team two minutes to respond, and then we're going to wrap it up with one minute. Who was it right here?

We have a woman who has microphone right here. No, I'm sorry. I promise this woman right here. Sorry. This woman right here raising her hand, I'm sorry. Then we're going to go to this gentleman and we're going to end on Farah Attasi and we're going to keep it short please because we're really running tight.

Lee Tucker: Me first?

Elise: Yes.

Lee: Thank you so much. My name is Lee Tucker. I work with the Syria Justice and Accountability Center. My question is to all of the panelists. I am surprised actually that this conversation about should the US do more has so far only focused on the use of military force especially with the two new initiatives that are right now circling around in current events for other types of pressure to change the situation.

We can look back in the past and say that depending on the information you have access to, the US either [inaudible 01:20:47] or play this circuitous game allowing all of the neighboring countries involved in this conflict meddle in the Syrian crisis creating the conditions for ISIS and for the atrocities that we've seen over the past several years.

My question is, is military force the only tool in our toolbox that we could be using? Can and should the US be doing other things to change the situation in Syria?
Elise: That's a really good point. Thank you for raising that. OK, very short.

Ravin Pasha: Ravin Pasha, Iraqi-American, and until recently with the US government. Actually, I want to build upon that and ask you a brief and blasphemous question. Taken a step back to ISIS and extremist, how do we beat them at their own game? By that, I mean let's face it. We've figured out more or less how the Arab's brain component worked and it has been successful in about one and a half countries.

In Syria, it's not a very unique situation. You have extremists. You have a regime issue. You have extremists that are building on two components that are fighting this on very dirty and they're gaining support from people, social services, and propaganda. The information and the social services is something that we have failed to address so far.

It's not just a humanitarian issue. It's a National Security issue and I would like to hear from you how we can actually get at them from the ground up, not just coming in from the military or policy component, but building or rather attacking the base based on the social services and information.

Elise: Thank you. That's building on that point. Farah, you really got to keep it short.

Farah Attasi: Thank you, Elise. The last of the best. Farah Attasi, President of the National Syrian Woman Association and political activist. I just would like to ask the audience and because we hear this for the last four years, what is the alternative to Assad? Honestly, I think this is the biggest insult for 20 million Syrian inside Syria and 20 million Syrians outside Syria to say that there are no alternatives other than Assad and his thoughts.

This completely contradicts the actual proposal or communication when we went to Geneva and we have to put, as Syrians, all our pain. Hundreds of thousands killed, many in the Syrian prisons, all those displaced internally and the refugee. We accept to go and negotiate a political settlement with the regime right in Geneva whereas the regime, all what we wanted to talk about terrorism and he thinks himself the solely ruler of this land.

I'd like to ask you, Josh, if he passed away tomorrow by a natural disaster or a natural heart attack, do you think Syria will collapse? The alternative is a national Syrian unity even with people within the regime right now. The Syrian opposition and the Syrian freedom fighter and the Syrian rebels who are open to negotiate a political settlement with a participation of people within the regime, within the system, within the state who did not commit crimes against the Syrian people. There is an alternative. It's not an excuse for this no policy to say that there is no alternative to Assad.

Elise: Thanks Farah.

[applause]

Elise: Thank you for so many Syrians and Syrian-Americans for being here and for having your voices heard. I think a lot of that touches on the same thing. We've talked a lot about ISIS and the military, but here, is the military the only tool? Should we be doing
more on the ground to build up these low LCCs, the community groups?

Should there be more political? How do we beat ISIS at their own game with social services? How do we develop the political opposition to create the conditions on the ground where if there is a military defeat of Assad that that could be taken advantage of? Two minutes, Aaron.

Aaron: Is this the end, basically?

Elise: No, we're going to have one minute but you're free to have two minutes.

Aaron: I have to deal with Doran in some other forum because I'm tired for the last four times, of hearing him say that...

Elise: OK, but this is biting into your time.

Aaron: What we're recommending is a pro-Iranian, pro-Assad policy. First of all, Josh and I...

Elise: But that's not the question. We're talking about the policy.

Aaron: No, no, but he's gotten away with this at least 10 times.

Elise: You can deal with that in your summation.

Aaron: All right, fine.

Elise: You can deal with that in your summation.

Aaron: All right. Forgive me for what I'm about to say to all of you. I wonder if we're looking at the same region, sometimes. Since 2011 we have watched the Arab Spring develop into something quite extraordinary, and quite extraordinarily negative. 20 percent of the Arab world is either in full-scale dissolution, civil war, or a high degree of decentralization; Libya, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria.

What's implicit in all of these questions, and we're not a potted plant. We are the most consequential power on earth, but what's implicit in all of these questions is that somehow we can fundamentally affect the currents of political change in this region, and I've only identified two examples with respect to our allies, three if you count Saudi Arabia.

Two billion bucks a year in Egypt has not given the United States the kind of leverage that it needs to affect policies in Egypt that really are vital to our national interests, including the promotion of gender equality, greater transparency, respect for human rights, and democracy.

The Israelis go about their business with respect to settlement activity, and we may have leverage but we choose not to use it. Implicit in all of these questions is that somehow we have the capacity and the will to deal with the situation. Building from the bottom up? What exactly does that mean in a country like Yemen or Libya? Iraq, we have assets,
intelligence, proxies, and influence maybe. Not in Syria.

**Elise:** OK, Aaron. Thanks.

[laughter]

**Elise:** Point well heard. Mike or Andrew, who wants to wrap up that point?

**Andrew:** Do you want me to respond to Aaron, or on the question?

**Elise:** Andrew, why don't you respond on the political...?

**Andrew:** OK.

**Michael:** I'm going to have two points at the end.

**Andrew:** OK. To your questions, and I think they're very good ones, I said that obviously there are many things that could be done. The United States has actually extended a tremendous amount of humanitarian and other kinds of assistance into Syria, and into Syrian opposition areas. I think that obviously is a good thing.

The reason why we're having the discussion that we're having now, I think, without coordinating, we haven't really on this, is that we are at a critical moment here, because the military aspect has not largely been tried with the exception of the Iranians. The Iranians have intervened in Syria, that's true, and the Shia militia. That's true. But we're reaching a crossroads because of ISIS, and we're bombing in Syria.

Now, our policy in Syria concerning our intervention there is called "uncoordinated de-confliction." It means that we arrange everything with the Iraqis...Josh predicted this, by the way, a couple months ago, before it all broke out.

We arrange everything with the Iraqis, they go over and talk to Assad, and we fly our planes over Syria, and he doesn't shoot at us. We can take him out. We can take out his air defense. It's not even hard, the Israelis do it all the time. But it's a little easier, a little cheaper.

Now, something major is about ready to happen. We're about ready to train and equip troops, and put them back into Syria, not in actually too short a time, depending on recruitment and so on. The question is, what does President Assad do when we do that? Because suddenly there's an alternative. It might not be the majority of Syrians and whatever, but there's an alternative.

It's our alternative, and we're responsible for it. What will happen at that point, when those troops are introduced, and they're attacked by the regime or ISIS? Will we defend those troops? Are we going to do that? That's the way this is going to unfold, and at that point the contradictions in this policy are going to become fully visible to all of us. That's something that policymakers are trying to work out at the moment.

Obviously, the military component of this is part of the political signaling that Elise was asking about and you were referring to, that can help us try to show and demonstrate that
we are indeed on the side of the opposition. Aaron's...

Elise: No, no, no, no, no, no. We're over two minutes, and we're running late. I'm sorry, we're going to wrap up. If you have any remaining thoughts I'd like to ask a prescriptive, not "What will he do? What hasn't he done?" What should the US be doing in Syria? Aaron, one minute.

Audience Member: Before that, we have one Syrian American, but I'm the only Syrian. [inaudible 01:29:47].

Elise: You've got to ask your executive director. Kurt?

Audience Member: A matter of one question.

Elise: Short, one question.

Audience Member: In particular...

Elise: No, but let's not go on. Let's keep it to a short question, OK?

Audience Member: Just two lines. Microphone?

[laughter]

Andrew: You don't need one.

[audience chatter]

Audience Member: As you like. In 1950, Syria [inaudible 01:30:13] master of Syria. Would you come out with a new theory that tells us about the future of Syria after Assad?

If someone like me, a previous governmental employee for almost eight years for the Syrian government, who worked for the Syrian government for almost eight years, if someone like me tells you that there are more than 1,700,000 official governmental employees in Syria, more than all Alawites in Syria, would you come up with a new theory to speak about the future of Syria after Assad? That's my question.

Elise: OK, Josh.

Joshua: Let me respond to...I forgot to ask this question...

Elise: And also respond to the gentleman here.

Joshua: OK. I didn't understand his question, really.

Elise: Basically what he's saying is that he is a former employer of the regime, and that himself and there are plenty of Syrians who are ready to help build the country and make a future for the country, and that there is an alternative.

Joshua: No, I know there's an...
Elise: He's saying, assuming there is an alternative, what is your theory for the future?

Joshua: There are many capable Syrians. The trouble is that they have not unified. This regime, coming out of the countryside and taking the Alawites and Druze and others, are the country bumpkins who threw out Farah Atassi's parents and grandparents from power.

The Atassis, many-time presidents of Syria, they were divided and that was their Achilles heel. When the Sunni notables, who were very well-educated, took over Syria after France left, they began to fight amongst themselves.

Quwatli, the President, a Damascian, would not let the Atassis have power. They all belonged to the Aleppo Party in the north. And Quwatli called them traitors because they were pro-Iraqi. He refused. He called the army into the streets to break their heads and put them in jail. That was Za'im, Husni Za'im. He took over and we've had military coups ever since.

That happened because the Sunni elite were bickering and fighting in the same way that they're doing today in the Syrian National Counsel and in many other militias. America cannot force those people and find a unity, when the Syrians can't find it themselves. If the Syrians and your grandfathers hadn't unified, the Alawites and the other bumpkins would never have come to power.

Elise: OK, OK.

Joshua: ...and they wouldn't have had military rule.

Elise: Michael, do you have a closing thought on that?

Michael: A closing...?

Elise: About the future.

Michael: A closing...for the future.

Joshua: He's asking me a question.

Michael: I agree with him.

Elise: He makes a point.

Michael: I agree, as I was saying, we cannot organize the energies, the interests, and the visions of the people of the Middle East when we hang back the way we're doing. There is a lot of material to work with inside Syria, and outside Syria.

The thing about the Middle East, Josh makes one point that's absolutely right. The Middle East will not put itself together, absent the United States putting together a larger vision for the region and bringing the major powers together, and getting them to...all putting their oars in the same direction.

The United States has abdicated the leadership position. It doesn't have to be necessarily
completely a military vision, but it starts with the military strategy. The political vision has to be built on top of that. And then there's an enormous amount of energies of people to work with. But we have hung back and we have let this thing just explode.

Elise: OK. Andrew, one minute. What should the US be doing?

Andrew: Oh, OK. Four steps.

Step one, accept Syria as a divided country and a failed state, akin to Saddam Hussein's regime in the '90s. Step two, the goal should be not to strengthen the Assad regime at this point, or let it off the hook, but to weaken both Assad and the jihadists by encouraging fights between the two. If Assad wants to fight extremism, and he brags about it all the time, we should let him and in the process weaken him.

Step three, help the Syrian moderate opposition consolidate their lines of control. The train and equip program will be key to this, and will continue to be key to it. Four, at the end remove Assad from power via diplomacy and other means to support the opposition forces, and hopefully eventually put the pieces of Syria back together again. Regime change in Syria doesn't have to mean regime collapse. It could mean regime transformation of some type.

Last but not least, and getting to Aaron's point, the biggest problem we have...I lived 15 years in the Middle East. I had a great time. People in the Middle East are wonderful. They're just like you and I and everyone else in the United States. They respond to consistency and honestly.

When you say you're going to do something, you follow through and do it. If you don't intend on following through and do it, then don't lay down the red line in the first place, because that undermines your credibility.

[applause]

Michael: That's for sure.

Elise: Josh.

[off-mic remark from audience]

Elise: OK.

Andrew: He actually said he had to step aside.

Elise: He said it four years ago. Josh, one minute.

Joshua: I don't think we have good partners in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is not going to help fix Syria. Turkey, Erdoğan, his own police tried to stop trucks of arms and his secret police had to stop them. They were going to Al-Qaeda.

We don't know who to arm in Syria. We don't know how to organize. The Middle East is melting down right now. We tried the Doran policy, which is to go in strong with an
organizing principle in Iraq. It cost us a thousand dollars. We did help create an alternative government, but it's not something we're going to do again.

The United States does not have a good policy for Syria. It cannot fix Syria. It's terrible and seems inhumane to stand on the sideline and to watch the Syrian war unfold the way it is, but I don't think that it is in America's power to stop it.

At this point, the Middle East is going through this upheaval and we are caught, in a sense, on the sidelines, watching. I think that if we don't send more arms in it's going to end sooner, with less bloodshed, even though there's been a tremendous amount, than if we start shoveling arms into the Middle East.

Elise: OK, thanks. Aaron, one minute.

Aaron: These positions were incorrectly framed as all-in or not-in, and Josh and I disagree on this.

Elise: What should the US be doing, Aaron?

Aaron: There's a balance here. Yeah, we should intensify our military attacks against ISIS, both in Iraq and Syria. We should support a moderate opposition, train and equip. Fair enough. Seems like a reasonable program. If we knew more about Sunni tribes we could deal with them, but I'm not sure we do.

All of these policies I think are credible, defensible, but ultimately they're not going to work for precisely the reason Josh has identified. We are stuck in a region we cannot transform and we cannot leave.

We need a good, sensible middle transactional ground that takes care of American interests, not nation building and not overextending ourselves as we did in the two longest wars in American history, which have brought incredible disaster, both to those countries, to our credibility, and to our political and military capacity.

It is not a pro-Iranian policy. It is not a pro-Assad policy. It's real, and it'll be up to the next President, last point. The next President, R or D, to find the balance between George W. Bush's risk readiness on one hand, and Barack Obama's risk aversion on the other.

Elise: All right. We're going to have to come to a close. We could go for another hour at least. And I just want to say that I really appreciate the passion in this room, both from our panelists and from the people who had their questions.

I'm sorry we didn't have time for more of them, but particularly the Syrians and the Syrian Americans who have families back home and people are suffering. I hope that we were able to not lose sight of the fact that we're talking about politics and military and terrorism and everything, but this is about people.

I hope that some lawmakers and decision-makers and people that are in a position to do anything have taken good food for thought from today. Thank you to the McCain Institute, and to Kurt.
Kurt: Let me say thank you very much to our fabulous moderator, Elise Labott.

Kurt: Does an awesome job at this, an absolutely awesome job. Thank you for taking part and participating in tonight's debate. Stick with the McCain Institute, look us up online, mccaininstitute.org. Get on our mailing lists. For those inclined to donate, feel free.

Kurt: Our next debate will be on America's opening to Cuba. Did Cuba win? February 26, here in this auditorium, please mark your calendars, please stick with us. Thank you very much for coming.